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INFO RUEHXK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 000309

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 1/23/2016

TAGS: FR KDEM LE PGOV PREL SY

SUBJECT: NEA DAS DANIN PITCHES INFORMAL LEBANON CONTACT
GROUP TO FRENCH, WHO RESPOND POSITIVELY

REF: A. PARIS 307

¶B. PARIS 257

¶C. PARIS 112

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (S) Summary: NEA DAS Robert Danin met separately on January 23 with his MFA counterpart, Herve Besancenot, and with President Chirac's Middle East adviser, Dominique Boche. Danin proposed establishing a contact group on Lebanon (with the likely participation of the U.S., France, Italy and Germany, and possibly of Spain and the UK), to discuss issues such as border monitoring and enforcement of the UNSCR 1701 arms embargo. The French responded positively, linking the contact group idea to the possible establishment of an embargo committee at the UN. "I agree we have to do something," said Boche. Danin also briefed the French on his recent visit to Jerusalem, noting the strong concerns he heard from Israeli intelligence officials about Hizballah's rearmament. The French reacted skeptically, but said they looked forward to a detailed Israeli briefing which they said has been scheduled. Both French officials thought that Hizballah may have miscalculated by launching strikes on the eve of the Lebanon Conference; in particular, Boche assessed that Nasrallah's popularity in the Arab world had plummeted following the execution of Saddam Hussein and the resultant Sunni-Shiite tensions. End summary.

French Welcome Contact Group Proposal

¶12. (S) NEA DAS Robert Danin met separately on January 23 with his MFA counterpart, Herve Besancenot, and with President Chirac's Middle East adviser, Dominique Boche. Previewing some of the subjects A/S Welch discussed the following day (Ref A), Danin proposed establishing a core group on Lebanon (to include the U.S., France, Germany and Italy, with the possible inclusion of Spain and the UK) to share ideas and coordinate an approach on issues such as border monitoring and enforcement of the UNSCR 1701 arms embargo. Boche responded positively, saying "I agree we have to do something." He linked the contact group proposal to the possible establishment of an embargo committee at the UN, and mentioned the possibility of sending a fact-finding mission to Lebanon to report on the status of the arms embargo. Besancenot was equally receptive, saying the contact group was "a very good idea" and asking whether it would also deal with a number of French hobby-horses: the status of the Sheba Farms, the exchange of Lebanese-Syrian ambassadors, and the delineation of the Lebanese-Syrian border. Danin replied no, the contact group would instead focus on enforcement of the

arms embargo and border monitoring.

Hizballah Reconstituting its Capabilities?

¶3. (S) Danin briefed the French on his recent visit to Israel, noting the strong concerns he heard from Israeli military and intelligence officials about Hizballah's rearmament even south of the Litani River. The French reacted skeptically. "This seems hard to believe, given the presence of UNIFIL and the LAF in the area -- nearly one soldier for every four civilians," said Boche, who doubted that Hizballah could afford a new round of combat at present. He conceded, however, that Hizballah might initiate hostilities if ordered to do so by Tehran. "If there is a tough international reaction (to Iran's nuclear program), I think Iran will try its best to create a mess in Lebanon," he added grimly. (Boche seemed to think it no coincidence that Hizballah's general strike on January 23 followed just one day after Iranian envoy Larijani's failed visit to Riyadh.) Besancenot was equally skeptical about Hizballah's state of readiness and desire for conflict: "Iran's strategy is to help Hizballah recover economically and militarily from the recent conflict, and in that strategy there is no room for a second round . . . We don't think they're preparing for a second round." Danin noted that U.S. concerns revolved around Hizballah's capabilities more than its immediate intentions. He also told the French that he had urged DMI Amos Yadlin to share Israel's information with the French.

¶4. (C) Boche opined that, whether acting on orders from Tehran or not, Hizballah had gambled -- and lost -- by choosing to launch its protests only two days before the International Conference for Lebanon. He emphasized that neither Hizballah nor Nasrallah were as popular with the Arab

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street today as they were six months ago, when Nasrallah was being compared favorably to Nasser. Boche suggested that Saddam Hussein's execution had been a turning point, one that had taken fear of Shiites (and by extension, distrust of Hizballah) to a new level in the Sunni Arab world. For his part, Besancenot expressed surprise at Hizballah's attempt to raise the political ante: "We knew the situation is bad, but we did not anticipate this," he said, adding (with some consternation), "This is very different than what our embassy has been telling us. I'll be eager to raise it with (French Ambassador to Beirut) Emie when I see him next."

¶5. (C) Besancenot, unlike Boche, seemed to believe that Hizballah and its allies had gained the upper hand in their contest with the March 14 coalition. "We understand Saad Hariri is in favor of maintaining the status quo (i.e., refusing to meet the opposition's demands) until November 2007 (i.e., the date of Lebanon's presidential election). We think this is not a good idea; one never knows what will happen," Besancenot said. He noted that even though the opposition had not yet managed to topple the Siniora government, it had nevertheless weakened the Lebanese Armed Forces. To illustrate, Besancenot said that his twin brother (the French MinDef's diplomatic advisor) was told by Elias Murr that half of his soldiers were sick due to long hours of cold-weather duty made necessary by opposition activity.

Israeli-Palestinian Affairs

¶6. (C) Turning to Israeli-Palestinian issues, Danin briefed his interlocutors on the Secretary's recent trip to the region as well as his own recent meetings with Palestinians and Israelis in Jerusalem. Besancenot expressed great interest in, and somewhat grudging respect for, the Secretary's efforts. "In the past we had the feeling you

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weren't really interested in moving the peace process

forward," he confided, intimating that the French had not expected much to come of the Secretary's meetings with PM Olmert and President Abbas. "But now the Jordanians are telling us you are planning something big -- what do you have in mind?" he asked. Danin explained that the U.S. was looking to explore intensively with the parties how to accelerate quickly through the Roadmap. The upcoming trilateral U.S.-Israeli-Palestinian meeting would help complement renewed Palestinian-Israeli engagement.

¶7. (C) As for their own analysis, Besancenot and Boche each said they were skeptical of PA President Abbas' decision to call for early parliamentary elections. "If he loses, then he'll lose power totally," said Boche. A better solution, he continued, would be to create a national unity government that would "take some steps toward the Quartet Principles," in which case the international community would be obliged to take some steps as well. Citing reports that Hamas was now willing to recognize existing agreements between the Palestinians and Israel, Boche suggested that this movement, though "not enough," would need to be "taken into account" if confirmed.

¶8. (U) NEA DAS Robert Danin has cleared this cable.

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